At the start of 2011, an international protest movement developed that saw citizens from the Middle East and Northern Africa taking to the streets to rile against corrupt governmental leaders and make their voices heard. The scope and fervor of these demonstrations recall the protests that swept across Asia, Europe and North America in the year 1968. Although many of the demonstrators in 1968 did not see the level of change effected today, they too were emboldened to speak out against political and social injustice in their respective countries. Before the age of instant electronic communication, the 1960s-era protestors overwhelmingly relied on visual media to promote their cause; as a result the demonstration poster became a consummate example of the intersection between document and fine art, social change and subversion.

Considering the student-led protests in Paris and Mexico City in 1968, this study will argue that graphic art—in particular mass-produced silkscreen posters—provided the ideal platform for exposing corruption, rallying support and distributing information amongst protesters. Posters were inexpensive and quick to produce allowing movement leaders to constantly respond to events as they occurred. In turn, these posters could be pasted on walls throughout the city, passed out as leaflets in crowds or held aloft as ersatz banners during marches. Using bold single-color graphics, these signs developed a visual vocabulary of dissent—replete with raised fists, barred mouths, zombie-like eyes and helmeted police

brutes—that helped to refine the character and ideals of the movement. Above all, the protest poster was fittingly democratic, allowing the people involved to circumvent established, often government-run, media outlets, relay the important issues and reinvent the system from the ground up. And while the protesters and their posters did not achieve the overthrow of national governments for which they advocated, this study will argue that they represent a graphic archival record of a singularly democratic moment in the modern history of France and Mexico.

PARIS | MAY - JUNE

In the spring of 1968 the French people, governed by 78-year-old President Charles de Gaulle, went on strike. Led first by Parisian university students upset with poor school conditions and an oppressive government, they were soon joined by trade union workers across the country lobbying for better wages, better working conditions and, most importantly, basic civil liberties. By the start of May an estimated seven to ten million French people were on strike—nearly one sixth of the country’s total population. As a result Paris was brought to a standstill. What the out-of-touch de Gaulle had originally written off as a juvenile ploy to get out of exams was now a full-scale walkout, with students occupying the Sorbonne, protestors erecting barricades in the streets, and the riot police—known as the Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité (CRS)—beating demonstrators on a daily basis.

As the protests swelled a coalition was formed by a group of art students from the École des Beaux-Arts and the École des Arts Décoratif. Calling themselves the ‘Atelier Populaire’, or Popular Workshop, they began to produce anonymous posters, newspapers and leaflets to promote their cause and inform the crowds. The Atelier took up residence in the Sorbonne’s art studios and quickly began making graphic art that responded to the developments of each

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day’s demonstrations. Members of the collective, both French and foreign, would meet at the workshop, suggest slogans, debate designs, and pick up stacks of printed materials for distribution. In this way, the Atelier was a people’s collective in the fundamental form; the “bourgeois” idea of an individual creator was eliminated in favor of a democratic production, encouraging collaboration at all levels. As the slogan above the door to their studio read: ‘ATELIER POPULAIRE OUI, ATELIER BOURGEOIS NON’ (‘Popular Workshop Yes, Bourgeois Workshop No’).

It is therefore fitting that the first poster created by the Atelier underscored both the diversity of the protestors and the unified front they formed. Composed of three simple words—usines (factories), universites (universities), and union (union)—the silkscreen print is clear and pithy. The loose handwritten style of the text recalls the individuals behind each named institution, while the bold alignment of the ‘u’ at the beginning of each word emphasizes their conjoined cause. As a starting point for a body of work that would eventually account for over 350 unique designs printed in thousands of copies, this poster epitomizes the Atelier Populaire aesthetic and practice. The simple slogan, clear yet casual style, and bold graphics of this poster would become trademarks for the Atelier, in large part because they provided facile and enticing visual means of delivering information to any passers-by. This design, like most Atelier posters, was silkscreen printed—a method of production that was inexpensive, fast, and easily reproducible. By silkscreening most of their posters the Atelier Populaire was able

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3 Kurlansky, 229.
5 It should be noted that the Atelier Populaire discouraged any interpretation of these posters as art or historical documents. As they wrote in the 1969 book Posts from the Revolution, Paris, May 1968, “The posters produced by the Atelier Populaire are weapons in the service of the struggle and are an inseparable part of it. Their rightful place is in the centers of conflict, that is to say in the streets and on the walls of the factories. To use them for decorative purposes, to display them in bourgeois places of culture or to consider them as objects of aesthetic interest is to impair both their function and their effect” (Ibid, n.p.). Even so, these posters have been collected and exhibited by several prominent museums, including the Museum of Modern Art (New York) and the Victoria & Albert Museum (London), and therefore cannot be denied as representative examples of visual and graphic art at the time. Accordingly, every attempt has been made in this study to give the proper contextual consideration to these posters as they relate to the protested issues.
6 Kurlansky, 229.
to produce a continuous stream of work that, when distributed en masse, would visually inundate the streets in a manner similar to their protesters.

In the course of developing their distinctive style, the Atelier Populaire made frequent and inventive use of common protest symbols in order to align their movement with past revolutionary causes. Many workshop posters depicted raised or bound fists, blind or mute figures, menacing police officers or charging tanks. As the workshop’s output grew more sophisticated, however, these generic protest symbols were customized to reflect the demands of the Parisian protestors. The plight of the industrial workers was represented by a fist rising from the smokestack of a factory, identifiable by its cantilevered roof. The students’ distaste for politicians and the bourgeoisie was depicted through the repetition of clone-like figures, including sheep and bespectacled bureaucrats, in the designs of several posters. Accordingly, posters decrying this social and political group often incorporated a whirling spiral into the design—in the horns of a sheep or the eyes of the bewildered boy—to underscore the hypnotic state in which the middle class lived and officials thrived. Over time these visual metaphors developed into a basic graphic lexicon upon which later posters would draw, tailoring each new iteration of the motif to recent events through the addition of a pertinent slogan.

This method of elaboration upon previous designs also served as a way to reflect the escalation of the demonstrations themselves. For example, a design dated to May 17 depicts a CRS officer menacingly brandishing a riot shield and baton. Poised to strike with baton in the air, the officer is cloaked behind the anonymity of goggles and a police helmet. By reducing the figure to a bold mass of shadow and light, this design cleverly conveys the single-minded brutishness of the CRS troops while also capturing the looming terror they invoked in the demonstrators who approached them. In the last weeks of May as the protest movement gained force and the CRS grew more aggressive in turn, the Atelier released two further reinterpretations of this design, comparing the CRS officers to the Nazi paramilitary organization the Schutzstaffel, or ‘SS’.
Although most certainly an inflammatory overstatement, the protestors’ comparison of de Gaulle’s riot squad to Hitler’s soldiers was likely meant as a wake-up call to their fellow French citizens. Alluding to the fact that the government and its representatives were not as benign as officials claimed, these designs were printed alongside a full-fledged campaign to draw attention to the misinformation propagated by Paris’ government-run media outlets. As part of this campaign, the Atelier began to produce single-sheet newspapers to inform the public about what was really happening in the streets. Calling them “wall journals” because they were pasted to the sides of buildings like traditional posters, these newspapers were both publicly accessible and nearly impossible to remove. Two such newspapers were printed in the last two weeks of June alone, each bearing the now iconic combination of the protest fist and factory smokestack as its masthead. By backing the newspaper with the increasingly emblematic design of the joined fist and factory, the workshop artists shrewdly reinforced their graphic identity. Just as advertisers relied on repetition to establish a brand identity, the newspaper logo reinforced for the public both the goals and designs of the Atelier Populaire, subconsciously reminding the viewer of the group’s tireless and wholehearted commitment to the cause.

Despite the growing support for the protestors amongst the French people, it was not until the third week in June that de Gaulle and his advisors finally decided to capitulate to their demands. With most of their needs met, the students ended their occupation of the Sorbonne on June 17. Although French citizens continued to struggle with controversial governmental policies for years to come, President de Gaulle was pushed out of office by the following year and died of natural causes the year after that.7 Thus the posters, despite their original temporary intent, provide the main lasting reminder of the fervor incited amongst the students and workers in Paris in the spring of 1968.

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MEXICO CITY | SEPTEMBER - OCTOBER

Halfway across the world, by mid-summer of the same year, students in Mexico City were facing a similar plight to that experienced by French students only months before. Like the French protestors, Mexican students were becoming aware of the ill effects of broadening class divisions amidst a growing economy. Mexico was also in the clutches of corrupt government officials—most notably President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, head of the socialist PRI party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) that had maintained a stranglehold on Mexican politics since the 1920s. Unlike the French, however, Mexican citizens who spoke out against social inequity and governmental misconduct were quickly and viciously silenced, with protestors frequently imprisoned, beaten or killed. By the end of August the students in Mexico City had realized that mere discussion was no longer enough; nearly 100,000 people took to the streets to protest the rampant political corruption and police brutality. President Díaz Ordaz, fearful that the demonstrators in Paris had infiltrated his country, took a tough stance against the protestors in the hopes of dousing the movement before the start of the XIXth Olympic Games, scheduled to be held in Mexico City in mid-October. Claiming that the time for “leniency” was over, the President dispatched the riot squad and protestors were imprisoned, savagely beaten, and, in rare cases, held at gunpoint. Others were simply made to disappear.\(^8\)

In the midst of this escalating violence a number of art students initiated a poster campaign modeled after the Atelier Populaire. Although these students never formed an official collective and remained anonymous, many are thought to have been counseled by a member of the Atelier Populaire: architecture student Jean-Claude Leveque who had traveled to Mexico City to join the student cause and inform protestors about silkscreening posters on a

\(^8\) Kurlansky, 337-339.
mass-produced scale. In actuality, the Mexican students were already quite familiar with
printing images en masse, having long studied the art of printmaker José Guadalupe Posada,
who spent his career producing broadsheets—evocative, news-related prints that were
distributed by the hundreds.

The student artists in Mexico did, however, draw great inspiration from the Atelier
Populaire’s clear and incisive visual language. One example can be found in a poster that
reads “We demand to know (who’s) responsible” above a caricature of President Díaz Ordaz
juxtaposed against a monkey posing as an army general. The concise slogan and economical
yet clever portrait recalls the Atelier aesthetic and can be directly tied to French posters that
satirized President de Gaulle’s equally prominent facial features. For both the French and
Mexican artists these caricatures found continued reuse in later poster designs and proved an
easy, low-grade way of communicating to the public the collective sentiment of the protestors:
that their leaders were overblown, distrustful or simply unsound.

Beyond the inspiration gleaned from their French forerunners, the Mexican protestors
also developed poster imagery in response to the promotional materials slowly being unveiled in
preparation for the Olympic Games. In 1966, a team of graphic designers had been hired to
create a cohesive identity for the Games, one that would portray Mexico as a historically rich,
forward-thinking, festive and, above all, peaceful host nation. By reworking Olympic designs
into demonstration posters, the student artists called attention to the glaring disparities between
the country Díaz Ordaz was promoting to the world and the one he was running at home.

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9 Many TGP artists, including Mexiac, visited the local universities in Mexico City in the spring of 1968 to sell their
prints and lecture about their work, which may explain the student's interest of this particular print. (Ibid., 336)
10 Best known for his broadsheets, large single sheet “newspapers” that featured linearly illustrated recounts of the
day’s most shocking stories, Posada’s work was usually printed on cheap paper and distributed in the streets. As a
forerunner of Mexican printmaking tradition and inspiration to later Mexican muralists, Posada’s broadsheets were
evocative, satirical, and socially conscious.
11 It should be noted that the students were likely not disparaging of the Olympic designers themselves but rather of
the delinquently propagandistic image the designers had been hired to convey. In fact, given the socially-conscious
projects later taken on by designers like Lance Wyman, one can safely assumed that the most of the Olympic design
team would have lobbied for the student cause if given the opportunity.
The most famous example of appropriation of Olympic imagery combined a 1954 linocut entitled *Libertad de Expresion* (Freedom of Expression) by Mexican artist Adolfo Mexiac, and the Olympic logo designed by Lance Wyman. Mexiac was a member of a prominent print collective called the Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP), which used printmaking as a way to promote social issues in Mexico from the 1930s through the 1950s. Thus, the student’s adaptation of Mexiac’s imagery can be seen as tribute to the TGP legacy and a testimony to the continuing struggles faced by Mexican citizens.

Although Mexiac’s intent was to represent the oppression of indigenous people by the Mexican government, the student artists were interested in the print for its general reference to freedom of speech. Originally depicting a frightened man with a padlocked chain strapped across his mouth, the protesters recreated the portrait and added the Olympic logo at the bottom, letting the reader see for himself the sardonic connection between the Olympic rings and the interlocking links of the chain. In this way, the poster reminded visitors that the staging of the Olympic Games came at great cost: the brutal suppression of the needs and rights of Mexican citizens. While this design maintained Mexiac’s expressive linocut style, paying homage to the TGP and Mexican printmaking tradition, the image itself proved so powerful that the student artists created a second, more graphic version to be included in later poster designs. More closely related to the Atelier Populaire aesthetic, this later version not only reduced the figure’s face to stencil-like shapes, but also served as a reinforcement of the first poster, establishing a visual vocabulary upon which the artists could continue to build.

Other posters also satirized the Olympic promotional materials, with no aspect of the design identity escaping re-appropriative retribution. The ’68 icon became a relentless and mind-numbing backdrop to the advancement of armed troops. The Olympic rings morphed into the gears of a charging tank. A series of stamps featuring silhouetted athletes, designed to be

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placed end to end to create a continuous stream of motion, was re-conceived to show an unending stream of police beatings with the caption ‘Año de la Lucha Democratica’ (Year of the Democratic Fight). One of the most successful design elements of the Mexico City Games, the athletic pictograms were also redrawn by the student protesters with the brutality of the riot police in mind. Originally conceived to be simple emblems that demonstrated the tool or action used each sport in the Games, the protest pictograms emphasized the tools used to suppress rather than encourage achievement: bayoneted rifles, tanks, gas masks, tear gas canisters, and spiked military boots.

In conjunction with the official Olympic designs, the Organizing Committee also sponsored an advertising campaign meant to promote a message of tolerance and international accord in advance of the Games. The project, using the slogan “Everything is Possible in Peace,” quickly flooded the city with billboards featuring photographs of carefree citizens going about their daily lives and stickers representing a stylized dove of peace. All in all nearly 600,000 stickers were adhered to vehicles across the capital making the dove one of the most visible design elements of the Games. It then comes as no surprise that the student protesters riled against the government’s hypocritical message of peace; doves across the city were symbolically splattered with red paint. Posters were created depicting the bird being stabbed with a bayonet or transforming into a fighter plane. One protester later recalled, “We made this comment in 1968, when the official dove was made. The State said, ‘This dove flies for Peace.’ We said, ‘Yes, but bloodily.’”

The protests finally came to a head in a truly ‘bloody’ fashion on October 2nd, when the student protest unions held a public discussion in the Plaza de la Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco. Between 5,000 and 12,000 people were said to have been in attendance, all of whom were

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15 David Sarhandi and Carolina Rivas, “This is 1968 . . . This is Mexico,” Eye 14, no. 56 (Summer 2005), 34.
detained in the plaza by two separate police forces: the uniformed army and a plain-clothed secret police force called the Battalion Olympia.\textsuperscript{16} Immediately after the start of the event soldiers used automatic weapons to open fire on the crowds while helicopters swooped overhead and snipers took control of the nearby roofs. This assault on the demonstrators, held captive in this small square by buildings on all sides, continued for nearly two and a half hours.\textsuperscript{17} Now known as the ‘student massacre at Tlatelolco’ it is believed that over 300 protestors died that night, adding to the nearly 1,000 injured and countless imprisoned during the demonstration.\textsuperscript{18} Despite this tragedy, ten days later, on October 12, the XIX\textsuperscript{th} Olympic Games opened, proceeding without a hitch, and the student movement dissolved.

And so, even with the overwhelming support garnered among Mexican citizens for the protest movement, the students were not able to secure meaningful change. Nor did they see an overthrow of the corrupt PRI government until the election of President Vicente Fox in 2000. In fact, as historian Mark Kurlansky notes, “Until he died in 1979, Díaz Ordaz insisted that one of his great accomplishments as president was the way he handled the student movement and averted any embarrassment during the Games.”\textsuperscript{19}

CONCLUSION | THE LEGACY OF PROTEST

While the student protesters in both France and Mexico were fighting for similar rights through similar visual means, there remained a major difference between the two groups: the Mexican students were killed trying to voice their discontent. Both conflicts capitulated to violence in the face of dictatorial leaders, but because Mexico’s government had so much at

\textsuperscript{16} In order to identity each other, the Battalion Olympic members each wore one white glove, which, ironically, made them particularly easy to spot. (Kurlansky, 340-341)
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 341-342.
\textsuperscript{19} Kurlansky, 343.
stake—namely the scrutiny of an international Olympic audience that already doubted the suitability of a Latin American host nation—Díaz Ordaz took decisive action to quash all discontent with violent and tragic results.

Although the Mexican students did not receive the governmental change that they so valiantly fought for, the posters they created—like those produced by the Atelier Populaire—continue to promote the legacy of their cause. Even today, these posters not only serve as historical documents but also as inspirational models containing a visual vocabulary of dissent that sees continued reuse and reinterpretation by protesters in their home countries. For example, demonstrators in 2004 in Oaxaca, rallying against a rigged gubernatorial election, drew upon the 1968 poster featuring silhouetted riot policemen beating a protestor. In Paris, an anonymous stencil graffiti artist re-imagined the Atelier Populaire symbol of a CRS officer, forgoing the ‘SS’ on the riot shield for another Atelier design that, instead, championed the democratic power of art. One could argue that street art in general, or stencil art graffiti in particular, has taken on the legacy of the 1968 protest poster, perpetuating its bold single-color imagery, concise language and subversive subject.

While the exact patrimony of the protest poster lies beyond the scope of this paper, the continual reuse of the 1968 imagery attests to its visual power and efficacy as a rallying point for social change. The exact nature and purpose of these posters is still contested: do they represent art, illustration, or graphic design? Given their temporal and disposable intention, is it fair to mark these as historical documents and enter them into museum collections? No matter one’s individual take on these debates, the protest posters are undoubtedly a unique and descriptive archive of the hardships facing these students and workers some forty years ago. The posters created in Paris and Mexico City in 1968—masterfully simple, topical and visual arresting—should be recognized as a vital part of the history of these events, still being studied and written about today.
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